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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a hybrid course framework at the Teachers College at Columbia University (New York) that seamlessly integrates a traditional course plan designed for on-campus students with an online course plan designed for distance learning students. Based on innovative teaching and learning principles, the course encourages active participation in the construction of knowledge through student interaction and teamwork. Preliminary findings revealed that this framework was effective in promoting online collaborative sharing of information and engaging students in active construction of knowledge. It is concluded that successful implementations of such hybrid course designs depend on: the ability to structure the course in such a way that no group of students gets an added advantage or benefit; the ability to foster interaction between both face-to-face and distance learning students based on their ideas and stance on critical issues rather than physical proximity; and the ability to maintain focus on course content rather than the technology associated with the delivery of the course. (MES)

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A Web-based Model for Online Collaboration between Distance Learning and Campus Students

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Abstract: The increased attention on distance education has influenced many institutions to expand their physical boundaries and develop distance learning courses. This paper presents a hybrid course framework that seamlessly integrates a traditional course plan designed for on campus students with an online course plan designed for distance learning students. Based on innovative teaching and learning principles, the course encourages active participation in the construction of knowledge through student interaction and teamwork. Preliminary findings revealed that this framework was effective in promoting online collaborative sharing of information and engaging students in active construction of knowledge.

Introduction

The increased attention on distance education has influenced many institutions to expand their physical boundaries and develop distance learning courses. About two years ago, Teachers College at Columbia University started a pilot program by offering three online courses. This program is one of the many initiatives organized by the Distance Learning Project (DLP), an interdisciplinary center for the advancement of online education. Currently, there are more than ten online courses and several on-demand workshops offered through the Distance Learning Project. Those courses are specifically designed for people who cannot attend face-to-face classes on a regular basis due to constraints of time, space or distance. Moreover, online courses attempt to respond to the needs of the working student population who requires more flexible educational options.

Many efforts to use the web as an instructional tool at the university level emulate existing traditional approaches to learning. In a traditional class arrangement, the instructor, as the expert, delivers information to the students who maintain a rather passive role. A predominantly asynchronous online environment seems to require an alternative communication structure in which student-to-student interaction becomes an essential element in support of learning. In this paper we present an example of a new instructional framework in which online and campus students are virtually brought together to explore issues related to Television and the Development of the Youth. Course designs for both online instruction and classroom instruction are seamlessly integrated into a hybrid course framework. Based on innovative teaching and learning principles, the course encourages active participation in the construction of knowledge through student interaction and teamwork.

Description of the Instructional Framework

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Television and the Development of the Youth is a graduate course offered by the Department of Communication, Computing and Technology in Education at Teachers College. The course is comprised of four main areas related to television and the development of children: 1) television as an industry, 2) effects of television on behavior, attitudes and beliefs, 3) public policies around television, and 4) media literacy at home and at school. The objective of the course is to help students become critical television viewers and understand the impact of television on the development of young children. In addition, students learn to identify and develop attractive educational television programs.

During the fall Semester of 1999, we offered this course in two formats, a distance learning format and a face-to-face format. Our plan was to merge the two classes and have them interact at a common virtual space. The course comprised of twenty-two distance learning and eleven face-to-face students. Both groups of students used the same course site, syllabus, readings, assignments, and online discussion area. Assignments from all students were submitted asynchronously in the online discussion space and were made available to comment and respond.

The only difference between the two formats of the course was the face-to-face meetings held on campus. There are two reasons for offering the course face-to-face in the first place; first, many campus students do not yet feel very comfortable with Internet tools and feel intimated in attending a purely online class. In fact, during the first meeting we held with face-to-face students, some of them expressed concern that communication and interaction would mostly take place in an online environment. Second, because some students pursuit their degrees full-time and spend a lot of their time on campus, they prefer to participate in regular weekly meetings with their instructor and peers.

Face-to-face sessions were designed in such a way that they did not provide any additional advantage to campus students. Moreover, online students were welcome to physically participate if they chose to. In several occasions online students came to class to meet the instructor and their peers. However, once they realized that all materials were available online they never came again. After each class session, a student volunteer posted a brief summary on the discussion space so online students could comment on what it was discussed during that session.

The course design is based on the principle that communication should include a broader audience, should be based on issues and interests, and should not be restrained by constraints of time or distance. In order to successfully integrate face-to-face and distance learning students it is necessary to structure the course in such a way that neither group has an added advantage. The Internet provides a medium that can achieve such integration. By bringing the two groups of students together in an online environment, we essentially expanded the traditional classroom boundaries and provided all students the opportunity to access the course material and interact with each other on around the clock basis.

Instructional Design Online

The development of the online framework of the course is based on a distance learning model to teach Instructional Design of Educational Technology, previously developed at Teachers College by Bell and Kaplan (1999). This model calls for design techniques that support increased group interaction, which is critically important for the success of a course at a distance. Several new attributes, however, were developed to address the specific aspects of the course related to the nature of its content. For example, we developed two new archives, the Television Show Archive and the Lesson Plan Archive, where students could store information related to television viewing.

Our course site consists of five sections that can be selected from a navigation banner on top of the site: a) Getting Started, b) Participant Info, c) Course Central, 4) What's New, and 5) Help Center. Figure 1 shows the welcome screen from the course site. Under each section there are sub-sections that can be viewed and selected from the left site of the screen when a major section has been chosen.

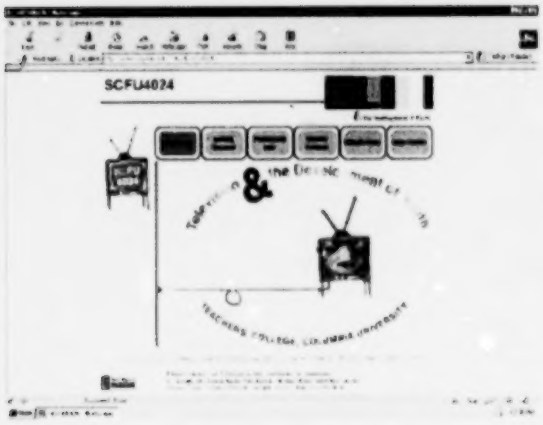

Figure 1: Welcome screen from the course site

Getting Started: The Getting Started section provides orientation information, an outline of the course and an explanation of registration procedures.

Participant Info: The Participant Info section includes four sub-sections: a) online student database, b) instructor's section, c) additional contacts, and d) participant status. Students can use this section to introduce themselves, contact other classmates or the DLP personnel, meet the instructor, and check on the progress and timeliness of their assignments throughout the semester.

Course Central: Course Central is the main area of the course and includes the syllabus, assignments, demonstrations, lecture slides, and the meeting room.
The *Syllabus* consists of twelve modules. Each module is accompanied by online readings and lecture slides. Most of the readings are hypertext links embedded within each module. Printed documents were sent to the distance learning students via surface mail.

Assignments are designed to help students reflect on their television viewing experiences and integrate readings for the development of a final project. Short assignments are posted online every week so that other students in the class may read and respond. Some assignments require students to analyze data from the Television Show Archive database, which is filled out at the beginning of the course. (The Television Show Archive is explained in detail later in the paper). As a final project, students are required to create an original educational show or adapt an existing commercial show and convert it into an educational one. Assignments help students make connections between readings and viewing experiences. They also stimulate reflective thinking in order to promote new understandings in this domain area.

A challenging component of the course is the *Demonstrations* section. Initially, we thought of incorporating streamed video to demonstrate few examples online. This idea was dropped quickly for two reasons: First, the course usually attracts many non-departmental students who are not proficient with Internet tools. Therefore, additional plug-ins and technical requirements might discourage student participation. Second, streamed video limits student flexibility to analyze other appropriate shows if they choose to. Consequently, we encouraged students to watch television shows of their choosing at different times of the day and discuss them in relation to the weekly readings. Providing students with the opportunity to identify and watch a show of their interest offers them a sense of freedom and choice. Consequently, we shifted control away from the instructors and promoted a more learner-centered approach.

The *Demonstrations* section includes television schedules from around the world, as well as official web-sites from major television networks (e.g. CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN). In addition, web-sites from major public, non-profit organizations in the area of educational television are also provided (e.g. PBS, CTW). Finally, we provide

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information and web-sites for selected miscellaneous educational programs (Sesame Street, Reading Rainbow, Time for Teletubbies, Barney and Friends, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood etc).

The *Meeting Room* is the primary communication area. It supports synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (bulletin board) interaction. The chat room permits live scheduled group discussions, including multiple one-to-one private chats. Class-wide chats are transcribed and published on the course site. The bulletin board provides a space for students to post individual and group assignments and receive feedback from the instructors and their peers.

The bulletin board consists of multiple discussion forums. Specifically, there is one forum for each topic addressed in the syllabus and one forum for each group stage. Forums are clearly labeled to help students understand where to post their contributions. Two additional forums permit students to ask technical questions and post announcements. Organizing the online discussion space is important for allowing students to follow discussion threads. Moreover, separate online forums help keep discussions more focused.

Course Archives

The Television Show Archive is a database-driven resource tool. At the beginning of the semester all students record and view a show of their choice and fill out a corresponding form in the Television Show Archive. Students collect information about the structure, audience, characters and advertisements of television shows. The Television Show Archive is intended to be a set of observation resources that can be used not only by students, but also by the larger academic community to study television patterns.

During the course of the semester, students are asked to make references to the Television Show Archive, interpret and contrast the data with course readings, and construct their own interpretations and understandings. For example, some assignments require students to draw conclusions regarding violent acts, ethnic diversity, and gender representation by analyzing and synthesizing data from television shows.

The Lesson Plan Archive provides students with an appropriate format for developing media literacy lesson plans. Users can sort lesson plans based on topic and age group. In addition to registered students in this course, instructors and students in other courses can also access the archive if they want to incorporate media literacy in their classrooms. Therefore, the two archives serve as primary sources of distributed information.

Interaction and Collaboration in the Online Environment

One of the basic concepts underlying the design of the course is that learning is a social experience. Therefore, intellectual development is significantly influenced by the social interaction between teachers and students, as well as between students and students (Honebein, 1996). Moreover, the construction of knowledge depends on the active and collaborative sharing of information and experiences. Consequently, participation of students in online discussion was highly encouraged, valued, and expected.

The weekly individual assignments are designed to stimulate interaction in order to help students place structure and coherency in their understanding. Moreover, interaction with peers helps students forge new connections between formerly disconnected knowledge and identify similar experiences. (Edelson, Pea & Gomez, 1996). An example of online interaction around gender portrayals on television follows:

> *T:* The first image that came to mind after completing our readings this week was the Super-bowl. Every year key advertisers save their best commercials for this spectacular sports event that millions of people watch nationwide. Because I am not an avid viewer of football, I was unaware how sexist these commercials can get. *October 16, 1999 11:07 AM*
>
> *A:* T, you made some very interesting points (that I agree with) when it comes to assumptions about sexuality and portrayal of men and women on TV. I was thinking about what you said and I realized that not only are TV shows catered towards popular markets, particularly young white markets, they are also catered to heterosexual markets. *October 19, 1999 12:23 AM*

Group work can stimulate the development of a cooperative learning environment where multiple ideas are generated, therefore, enriching the learning process. Group work in this class culminated in a final project that required the creation of an original educational show or the adaptation of an existing commercial show into an educational one. Each group consisted of three to five students. Early in the semester, students brainstormed ideas in the meeting room and formed groups according to their interests. The final project progressed incrementally through the semester. Students interacted regularly with group members and reported their collective views and outcomes. An example of group brainstorming follows:

> *J*: Let's chat at 4pm on Thursday, just for a little bit. Let's all think of what kind of issues might be interesting to talk about in our show. I will also record the *Sex in the City* show so we can talk about it. *September 28, 1999 09:12 PM*
>
> *R*: I was just reading the article "Children, Adolescents, and the Media: Five Crucial Issues" and a section from Issue No.4 ("What can be done to improve the quality of television?") reminded me of our project. A possible answer is the adoption of a uniform television industry code that insists on responsible portrayals of sexuality. There is also a short section on sex/sexuality and television that you might want to check if you haven't already. *September 28, 1999 10:33 PM*
>
> *J*: I also thought that point No. 4 of Strassburger's five points was very relevant to our project. Have either of you seen those ads on TV for birth control pills? The greatest selling point is that it clears up your skin! *September 29, 1999 01:29 PM*

In order to complete their weekly group assignment, students used the chat room, e-mail, and discussion forums. In addition, each group received weekly feedback on the progress of their project from their peers and instructors. At the end of the term, most groups developed a web site to present their project. Figure 2 shows a screen from the final project *Someone's in Terrible Denial*, an adaptation of the television show *Sex in the City*. Students in this group chose this show to discuss issues on sexually transmitted diseases.

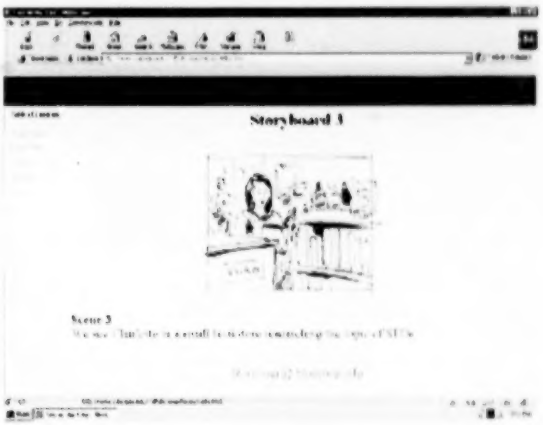

Figure 2: Screen Shot from the Final Project *Someone's in Terrible Denial*

Since campus students held regular face-to-face meetings and knew each other better, we expected that many of them would form teams with each other. We were particularly encouraged that all final project groups included members from both face-to-face and distance learning classes. This fact provides evidence that member participation in a group was based on interest for specific topics and stance on social issues rather than physical proximity and ability for face-to-face communication.

Overall, it was obvious that students actively participated in the online cooperative project. All teams demonstrated enthusiasm about working on a creative project and were able to submit products of outstanding quality. Although some of the students sometimes met on campus to coordinate their efforts, the final arrangements were made online. Documenting his experience, one of the face-to-face students said:

The project experience was very positive considering R. lives in Colorado and both J.H. and J.R. were part of the online format of the course. Even though T. and I were the only students who saw each other in class, we all kept in touch with one another regularly through e-mail and chats. We learned a lot through the course and found that online interaction and multimedia were great assets to our education.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that online education has the potential to transcend the traditional nature of face-to-face teaching and include a larger community of information resources, content material and people. Instructors are now able to shift more control to the students and become facilitators of learning, helping students construct understanding within a more authentic context. Our experience also,suggests that both off-campus and campus students can benefit from online collaboration because they all have the opportunity to interact in a knowledge building community that is not limited by time or place.

This paper presented a hybrid course framework that seamlessly integrated a traditional course plan designed for on campus students with an online course plan designed for distance learning students. Our study indicates that successful implementations of such hybrid course designs depends on:

- The ability to structure the course in such a way that no group of students gets an added advantage or benefit.
- The ability to foster interaction between both face-to-face and distance learning students based on their ideas and stance on critical issues rather than physical proximity.
- The ability to maintain focus on course content rather than the technology associated with the delivery of the course.

The Internet provides an increased range of human capabilities that will result in dramatic changes in the way we teach and learn. The model presented in this paper proposes a radical departure from the typical university model. It is centered on students and is open and diverse, while at the same time the instructor is delegated to coaching students in the pursuit of instructional goals. It is our hope that in the near future traditional university models will give their way to such innovative teaching and learning practices.

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